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Viewing cable 08ATHENS925, JOINT EXERISE HIGHLIGHTS DIFFERENT GREEK, ISRAELI

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Reference ID	Created	Released	Classification	Origin
08ATHENS925	2008-06-27 15:42	2011-08-30 01:44	SECRET	Embassy Athens

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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 02 ATHENS 000925

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 06/27/2018

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SUBJECT: JOINT EXERISE HIGHLIGHTS DIFFERENT GREEK, ISRAELI
MOTIVES IN CLOSER TIES

Classified By: DCM THOMAS COUNTRYMAN. REASONS 1.4 (B) AND (D).

¶1. (S) In a June 25 conversation with DCM, PM Karamanlis' diplomatic advisor Constantinos Bitsios confirmed that the military exercise that took place in the eastern Mediterranean over Greek airspace in early June and reported in the NY Times June 20 was a joint Israeli-Greek exercise.

Bitsios expressed concern, however, about the leak of information to the press on the exercise because public focus on the issue would make closer Greek-Israeli relations more difficult. (NOTE: The exercise, which apparently was entitled "Glorious Spartan," has indeed received widespread critical press in Greece following publication of the NY Times article. END NOTE.) Bitsios said he wanted to move PM Karamanlis closer to Israel, which Bitsios viewed as a modern, stable democracy and potential partner for Greece. There were many domestic political hurdles to strengthening the relationship, however, and negative press complicated the process. Bitsios also informed DCM of the upcoming visit of Israeli DefMin Ehud Barak.

12. (S) On June 27, Israeli DCM Joseph Moustaki provided DepPolCouns further details on the exercise and Israel's strategic interests in Greece, particularly in regards to Iran. Moustaki said his embassy was not heavily involved in the planning for the exercise, which was coordinated by the Israeli DATT who is stationed in Rome, and was informed only a few days before the exercise began. (NOTE: This seems unlikely, however, given official statements by the Hellenic Air Force General Staff (HAFGS), which described several advance planning meetings between the HAFGS and Israeli military officials. END NOTE.) Moustaki said a similar exercise, though on a somewhat smaller scale, had taken place last year, but that time the Israelis had not informed the Greeks, who were caught "completely off-guard." Last year's exercise had also been preceded two weeks prior by Israeli test firing of a sophisticated missile near Cyprus. These two events had spooked the Greeks, led to several delegations exchanging visits, and, ultimately, an apology by Israel. The outcome of the incidents and discussions, however, was better Israeli-Greek relations and a promise to coordinate and cooperate on such exercises in the future.

13. (S) Moustaki confirmed that the exercise this June, which involved 100-150 planes, indeed enjoyed better coordination and cooperation. While officially a joint exercise, the Greeks were interested primarily in practicing in-flight refueling because they did not have their own tanker aircraft. The exercise was not confined to the southern Aegean but went "all over Greece" as far north as Larissa. Greece was practically Israel's only venue for such an exercise because they could not fly to the south or east. Moustaki claimed not to know the precise motivation behind conducting the exercise now, but speculated that the Israeli and, perhaps, U.S. governments had learned that Iran had recently made some technical advance in its nuclear production activities and the exercise was a way to signal that we knew what they had done and were watching. Alternatively, Israel perhaps simply wanted to show Iran that it had the capability to strike Iran, if necessary.

14. (S) On the July 1 visit to Greece by Israeli DefMin Barak, Moustaki noted that Palestinian Authority President Abu Mazen was also scheduled to visit Greece June 30. Barak officially was coming to attend a meeting of the Socialist International (of which Greek opposition party PASOK Chairman Papandreou is currently president), but he would also meet with PM Karamanlis, FM Bakoyannis, and DefMin Meimarakis. Moustaki said he was recommending few statements to the press on Barak's meetings. This would foster ambiguity and suspicion on the part of the Iranians, as well as the Arabs. "We want to nourish Iranian suspiciousness of the Greeks," he noted, making the point that Israel did not trust Greece in its stated attempts to serve as a "bridge" between East and West. The Arabs did not trust Greece either, he argued. "They talk about being a bridge, but they never seem to deliver anything." Finally, Moustaki noted Israel's wariness of selling weapons systems to the Greeks. The Greeks were very interested in sophisticated Israeli weaponry, but Israel was concerned that what it could provide the Greeks -- given their growing closeness to Moscow -- might leak to the Russians, who would in turn provide it to the Iranians.

15. (S) COMMENT: Israel and Greece each has its own motives in strengthening ties, but there are also tough obstacles to

improved relations. Israel opened its embassy in Athens in 2001 and conducting joint military exercises now is a good indication that Israel's relations with this old EU-15 member-state are maturing. By strengthening ties with Greece and conducting joint exercises, Israel might also help create

ATHENS 00000925 002.2 OF 002

the ambiguity in Iranian minds it craves. At the same time, Greece's oft-stated desire to be a "bridge" between the Iranians (and Arabs) and the West, as well as its recent moves toward Russia coupled with endemic corruption in arms deals, lessens Greece's attractiveness as a partner for Israel. From the Greek perspective, closer ties with Israel help strengthen their credentials as a go-between in the region and might help deflect criticism for Greece's footdragging on Iran sanctions. But there is long-standing opposition to improving ties with Israel in large segments of the traditionally pro-Palestinian Greek population. It would be particularly difficult for the GOG to weather the storm created by an Israeli attack on Iran, which the Karamanlis government could (justifiably) be seen as having aided with the latest joint military exercise.

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